



Globalization, Education, Work and the Ideology of the “Self-Evident Natural Laws” of Capitalist Production.

by Ralph Barrett and Diane Meaghan

Paper presented to the Consequences of the Changing World Economy for Class Relations, Ideology and Culture, Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy and the United States Journal of Nature, Society and Thought, University of Minnesota, Hanoi, Vietnam, January 9-11, 2006

With the implementation of structural adjustment programs, economic restructuring, regional and bilateral trade agreements, including the North America Free Trade Association (NAFTA) and the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), rapid and profound changes have restructured Canada into a market-driven economy (Panich, 1994; Teeple, 1995). Since the mid-1980's, federal and provincial governments have promoted a neo-liberal development strategy that emphasized an unrestricted market, rather than the state as regulatory of the economy and society. The integration of the Canadian state into an international market encouraged unfettered economic growth, decreased spending on social programs and deregulated state responsibilities, weakened national economic borders and an increase in foreign investment and the production of goods and services for export. By reducing the regulatory foundation and the funding framework (crucial components of a “social safety net” for health, social services and education), both levels of government actively pursued the privatization of public services such as postsecondary education and effectively gave transnational corporations access to potentially valuable economic activity.

Both the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank treat education no differently than other industries and increasingly advocate through intellectual property rights and other regimes that educational policy should be defined at the national and international level (World Bank, 1994; Jarzabkowski, 2002). Downloading responsibilities for services from both levels of government encouraged “private-public partnerships” to emerge in postsecondary educational institutions as a way to meet the needs within very limited budgets (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2005, p.56). Globalization and market liberalization served to displace the levels of government encouraged “private-public partnerships” to emerge in postsecondary educational institutions as a way to meet the needs within very limited budgets (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2005, pg.56). Globalization and market liberalization served to displace the perception of education as a socialized concept of basic needs and human rights in favour of one that views it as just another commodity in the marketplace. Increasingly, educational structures were dismantled and replaced by new policies and procedures aimed at restructuring postsecondary education to follow a global trend of corporatization and create a “market responsive” sector. As a result,

the delivery of quality educational services became more problematic, shifting the burden of adjustment from the state to the individual in the form of increasing tuition fees and decreasing services. The literature points to the fact that a large segment of Canadian faculty are employed part-time or have been replaced by technology in colleges, and they face higher work loads, mounting restrictions, increased stress and reduced job satisfaction and morale (Buchbinder and Newson, 1990; Fischer & Ruberson, 1988; Currie & Newson, 1998).

In Volume One of *Capital*, Marx (1977:688) argues that “the advanced capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws.” An habitual tradition which uses the language and concepts of economic markets for the purposes of defining and describing the purposed, methodologies and course content of educational institutions has been a common practice in North American postsecondary educational institutions for several decades. Educational institutions are regarded primarily as the site for providing training in specific skills required for the occupations needed in the global marketplace. There has been a shift from knowledge to information with an emphasis on gaining access to information rather than knowledge that is seen as inclusive of culture and social relations.

Accompanying this market rhetoric is the promotion of a “self-evident” belief in the declining market value of courses in philosophy, politics, history, literature and languages. On the other hand, students are encouraged to demand and to select, especially in postsecondary institutions such as colleges and universities, vocationally relevant courses of study (eg. accounting, computer, management and business studies). Historically, both conservatives and radicals have vigorously criticized the overwhelming emphasis placed on vocational training and the subservience of educational institutions to the “needs” of the marketplace and corporate ideology. Benefits flow preferentially from such markets-oriented policies that pay little attention to social, cultural or environmental costs or their impact on educational communities and services. As a direct result of government policy intended to create an environment for international compliance that is driven by inequitable corporate-led structures, teaching and research that used to benefit the common good now benefits private interests and promotes consumerism over citizenship.

Both Adam Smith (1723-1790), the alleged godfather of neo-classical economics and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party were, for their own reasons appalled by the conditions of work in capitalist societies. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), introduced his concept of the division of labour as the key to increasing worker productivity. The traditional craft worker, according to Smith, spent too much time and effort performing a variety of simple, repetitive, physical motions or tasks. These tasks could be performed by anyone since they involve only ordinary manual dexterity. Accordingly, by determining the number of simple repetitive physical motions involved in producing pins, for example, repetitive physical motions involved in producing pins,

assigning these tasks to individual specialized workers and determining by experiment the logical sequence of tasks that maximized output, Smith help establish the theoretical foundation for increasing profits through mass productions. In practice, the resulting deskilling of work and workers increases productivity, justifies lower wages and produces higher profits.

At the same time, Smith acknowledged that the psychological and social costs of this new division of labour are enormous and publicly funded education was advocated to prevent the “drowsy stupidity” which was systematically produced in the industrial workplace:

In the progress of the division of labour, the employment of the far greater part of those who live by labour, that is, of the great body of the people, comes to be confined to a few very simple operations, frequently to one or two. But the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man, whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind, renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble or tender sentiment, and consequently of performing any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. Of the great and extensive interests of his country he is altogether incapable of judging; and unless very particular pains are taken to render him otherwise, he is equally incapable of defending his country in war. The uniformity of his stationary life naturally corrupts the courage of his mind and makes him regard with abhorrence the irregular, uncertain and adventuresome life. It corrupts even the activity of his body and renders him incapable of exerting his strength with vigor and perseverance in any other employment than that to which he has been bred. His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in his manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellect, social and marital virtues. But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the majority of people must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it (Smith, 1951, p.340-41).

That government should take such pains was patently obvious to Smith (no neo-con free market he!). It is apparent that “dumping down” is certainly no merely contemporary phenomenon, and Smith did not endorse it. For him, publicly funded education, even for the masses, had “to do with the ideas of civic humanism and the extent to which modern ‘man’ could attain something approaching the classical concept of citizenship” (Skinner, 1995, p.87). Education is not simply for the dissemination of “skills, training and entrepreneurship to do business in the global economy”, and government must make funding available where “the profit motive is likely to prove inadequate” (Skinner, 1995, p.95).

The marketplace for Smith was not a magical solution for social problems, and more effective participation in the market was certainly not the only goal of education – especially higher education. Public works for the benefit of society, such as publicly funded education, were not to be left to the “invisible hand” which is said to direct production and consumption in the private individual quest for profit. In fact, Smith was opposed to the very institution of privately owned corporations, which allowed merchants and manufactures to dominate the economy to the detriment of society. Public works and institutions were not profitable for individual investors and were not intended to be. “The direct object of Smith’s attack was not government policy but private invested interests” (Lubacz, 1995, p.53) which distorted public initiatives for their own gain. This comes as news to business leaders and corporate gurus who invoke the name of Adam Smith, but who refrain from reading what he actually wrote. Thus, those who argue for the supremacy of the free competitive market, those who advocate the supposedly cost-efficient privatization of public services and those who would reduce education to vocational training and studies of entrepreneurship have made Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations* part of the sales pitch” (Lubacz, 1995, p.67) but have twisted his words and warped his meaning. Karl Marx came closer to the mark when he commented that “for preventing the complete deterioration of the great mass of people which arises from the division of labour”, Adam Smith recommends education of the people by the state but in prudently homeopathic doses” (Marx, 1977, p.484). While radicals like Marx accept Smith’s analysis, they see it as limited and palliative, but do agree on the importance of formal publicly funded education (especially in the areas of the humanities and social sciences) for the development of a critical, informed and responsible citizenry. Education, for Adam Smith, is not of economic interest but of broadly humane importance.

Antonio Gramsci argued against the reduction of education of the masses to skills training. Writing in *Avanti* in December 1917, he argued that “the proletariat needs a free school... not a school of slavery and mechanization... Professional schools must not become incubators of little monsters, who are aridly educated for a job, without general ideas and a general culture, without spirit and with only a sharp eye and a strong hand” (quoted in Welton, 1980, p.1).

Education primarily based on job skills allows the ruling class to manufacture conformity and consent among the masses. For Gramsci, any successful challenge of the ruling capitalist class’s power and ideology requires the working classes to become consciously aware of their own culture, history and politics. This, he contends, requires knowledge of traditional culture, history and politics and of their role in dominating the masses. The danger of fascism in Italy was its introduction of vocational training under the slogan of “child-centred progressiveness” for the working classes. This type of ahistorical, apolitical education effectively removed “the historical memory of the working classes”. Even though its emphasis on history, literature and languages, encouraged disciplined study and critical analysis. “Fascists”, observed Gramsci, “found their allies in the schoolmasters who encouraged spontaneity and autodidacticism and not in those who functioned as agents of cultural transmission by

requiring students to learn the “facts” of history, geography or science” (Welton, 1980, p.9)

For Gramsci, a disciplined study of culture, history and politics is necessary for the struggle of workers against capitalism, and schooling was viewed as hard work requiring concentration, persistence and self-control. The facile vocationalizing of mass education reinforced the inequalities of the social class system; in the alternative, Gramsci argued that the comprehensive education of the ruling classes should be extended to the children of the proletariat because academic work was relevant to understanding the real world of capitalist cultural, economic and political exploitation. It is worthy of note in this regard that the Liberal provincial government is currently reorganizing “general education” in Ontario Colleges, and the single area of study that they are deleting from the curriculum (as opposed to mere condensation and reduction) is the critical study of “work and the economy”, arguably the most vital part of students’ non-vocational education. In its place are studies of the media and popular culture which are to serve as educational filler and academic distraction from a critical analysis of the society in which the students will work and live. Similar to education under Mussolini, current student-centred educational practices are easily compatible with ruling class cultural and ideological hegemony. Adam Smith’s informed citizen and Gramsci’s educated radical are not easily suppressed or impressed by the friction-free rhetoric of advocates of vocationalism, entrepreneurship and business studies directly related to the job market. On the other hand, the logic and practice of this approach seem to be firmly entrenched in postsecondary institutions in North America and especially in community colleges, junior colleges and technical institutes.

As well, the politically manufactured fiscal crisis in education is being used to create a conservative, corporatist system of postsecondary education. In order to maintain and extend access to education (despite massive increases in tuition fees), colleges and universities are being compelled to become more cost efficient, job oriented and committed to the corporate mentality of the “bottom line”. Corporate-college “partnerships” and significant fund raising activities are encouraged to supplement public funds at the costs of surrendering public control. Adam Smith, many forget, was not a professional economist but a professor of moral philosophy; his primary interest was not in producing propaganda for a rapacious economic elite, but in understanding how wealth was produced and distributed so that societies would learn not only how to produce more quantitatively but also how to distribute goods and services more equitably. Adam Smith’s commitment to the common weal, however, has been studiously ignored by those who claim him as their intellectual patriarch. As a result, no matter what price is to be paid in social civility, “the campus”, in Neimark’s words (1999, p.24), “is becoming virtually indistinguishable from the marketplace, and other universities (and colleges) and their faculties are becoming entrepreneurs. In addition, the “liberal arts are strikingly absent from this framework for public education” (Neimark, 1999, p.9). The devaluing of the humanities and social sciences as irrelevant to the

careers of students is leading to the underdevelopment of critically thinking citizens who understand the role of political and economic power. It encourages only narrow vocational knowledge and "skill sets" and thus, the "drowsy stupidity" essential for corporate domination of postsecondary education.

While corporate capitalism speaks in the language of progressiveness, market relevance and vocational education, it is capitalist ideology of class relations as "self-evident laws" of economic and political exploitation that is being promoted. Depoliticized education in the guise of educational choice is no substitute for a painstaking and protracted education in the politics of economic exploitation. Corporate capitalism has a vested interest in encouraging the ideology of the "self-evident natural laws" of free markets as history, economics, politics and psychology in postsecondary educational institutions decline, in the hope that this will produce a docile working class, especially among the graduates of colleges and universities in North America.

References

Canadian Union of Public Employees. 2000, "Annual Report on Privatization: CorporatePushers", <http://www.cupe.ca/arp/01> accessed May 12, 2003.

Buchbinder, H., & Newson, J. 1990, "Corporate-University Linkages in Canada: Transforming a Public Institution", *Higher Education*, 20:355-79.

Currie, J., & Newson, J. (Eds), 1998, *Universities and Globalization: Critical Perspectives*, London: Sage Publications.

Fischer, D., & Rubenson, K. 1998, "The Changing Political Economy: the Private and Public Lives of Canadian Universities", in Jan Currie and Janice Newson (Eds.) *Universities and Globalization: Critical Perspectives*, London: Sage Publications.

Jarzabkowski, P. January, 2002, "Centralised or Decentralised: Strategic Implications of Resource Allocation Models", *Higher Education Quarterly*, 56(1):5-32.

Lubacz, H. (1995), "Adam Smith and the Free Market". in S. Copley and K. Sutherland (Eds.), *Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: New Interdisciplinary Essay*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mark K. (reprinted 1977), *Capital*, Volume One, New York: Vintage Books. (originally published in 1867).

Neimark, M. (October, 1999), "If It's so Important, Why Won't They Pay for It?", *Public Education at the Turn of the Century*, *Monthly Review*, p. 20-31.

Panich, L. 1994, "Globalization and the State" in Ray Miliband & Leo Panich, (Eds.), *Between Globalization and Nationalism*, London: Merlin Press: 35-49.

Skinner, A. (1995), "Adam Smith and the Role of the State: Education as a Public Service", in S. Copley and K. Sutherlands (Eds.), Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: New Interdisciplinary Essays, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Welton, M. (1980), "Gramsci's Contribution to the Analysis of Public Education Knowledge". Unpublished paper presented to the Canadian Association of Foundations Education, Montreal.

World Bank. 1994. Higher Education and the Lessons of Experience, Washington D.C.: World Bank.

Ralph Barrett and **Dr. Diane Meaghan** are Liberal Studies Professors at Seneca College. They can be reached at diane.meaghan@senecac.on.ca

 [Contents](#)

• The views expressed by the authors are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The College Quarterly or of Seneca College.

Copyright © 2006 - The College Quarterly, Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology